



**AN ANALYSIS OF SENTENCE STRUCTURE ERRORS
IN ESSAY WRITINGS COMMITTED BY SOPHOMORES
AT CAN THO UNIVERSITY, VIETNAMⁱ**

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Abstract:

This study investigates the common sentence structure errors and the source of those errors, focusing on the four types of sentences such as simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex. The data source for this study was collected from 80 writings composed by EFL second-year students. Simultaneously, the researchers designed an interview to explore the causes of errors, from which some resolutions were proposed. The findings revealed that there were seven (7) types of errors in terms of sentence structure: (1) Dangling Modifier, (2) Squinting Modifier, (3) Illogical Sentence, (4) Fragmented Sentence, (5) Run-on Sentence, (6) Inappropriate Coordinating Conjunction, and (7) Inversion of Subject-Verb. Those errors were caused by mother tongue influence, teaching approaches and materials, lack of grammatical knowledge and others. This research contributes to the discipline of linguistics by giving out several possible solutions that can help learners to prevent in their compositions.

Keywords: English sentence structure, errors, error analysis, sources of errors

1. Introduction

Among four core English skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing, writing is a challenging task as compared to other tasks. It is said to be the most complicated language skill to learn (Allen and Corder, 1974, cited in Amin, 2014).

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Similarly, Al-Shujairi and Tan (2017) claimed that writing is one of the most difficult and complex academic skills for foreign or second language learners to expertise, since it requires learners to engage in a variety of sophisticated ways in terms of literary and thematic knowledge, writing experiences, and English usage (Chen & Yu, 2019).

For EFL learners, they are expected to be mastered English writing, especially academic writing, since writing skill has an immense impact on their education and occupation. When it comes to writing skills, people had a poor capability of writing can signify an unsatisfactory performance, which means there could be a low likelihood of development (Iamsiu, 2014). Students at the university level, particularly those in their second year, are presumed to have at least an intermediate level of English proficiency. Unfortunately, the learners still perform poor writing ability in their sentence structure. Therefore, the sentence structure that they apply in their writing needs to be explored in-depth as sentences are one of the most crucial aspects of producing and comprehending a text. By analyzing errors in students' sentence structure, students recognize their errors and the kind of errors they committed, this allows them to stave themselves off repeating the same errors.

The English essay writings were selected since it represents diverse use of sentence structures comprehensively. The sentence structure selection in written works is significant to concentrate on. The objective of this study is to answer the following questions:

- What are the common English sentence structure errors students committed?
- What is the source of errors?
- What solutions should be taken?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Sentence Structure Types

It can be separated into four types of sentences such as simple sentence, compound sentence, complex sentence and compound-complex sentence. According to Oshima and Hogue (1999: 155), a simple sentence contains one independent clause which is a set of subjects and verbs. The simple sentence is also regarded as a fundamental structure that influences the capacity to generate compound and complex sentences. The second type of sentence is a compound sentence which is made up of two or more separate clauses. These clauses are linked together by coordinating conjunctions such as and, but, or, not, for, yet, so, etc (Jacobs, 2020). The third one is a complex sentence, Torres Gouzerh (2019) defined it as a sentence with one independent clause and one or more dependent clauses. These sentences usually are bridged by subordinating conjunction such as when, while, because, although, if, that, etc. The final one is a compound-complex sentence that encompasses two or more independent clauses linked by a coordinating conjunction and one or more dependent clauses (Sundari, 2013).

2.2 Definition of Error

Corder (1973) defined error as features of the learners' expressions that differ from those of any native speaker. Richards and Schmidt (2002) then described the error as the employment of a word, a grammatical item, a speech act, etc in a way that a proficient or indigenous speaker of the language considers inaccurate or incomplete learning. It is usual for learners to make errors in their writing process. Errors imply that language learners are still acquiring new knowledge in order to perform the language well. Thus, errors play a pivotal role in the learning journey (Littlewood, 1984). Facing mistakes whilst gaining language knowledge, learners can improve their capability in the language since they learn from their errors. Obviously, errors have been seen as a tool that learners utilize to learn. For this reason, learners may absorb more and strive to enhance their skills via errors.

2.3 Error Analysis

For decades, a number of scholars have taken notice of Error Analysis in the discipline of language. The definitions of Error Analysis provided by some researchers are as follows. According to Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982), error analysis is a process of investigating errors produced by EFL and ESL learners when they acquire a second language. James (1998) defined that the comparison between what knowledge learners have gained and what knowledge they have lacked is the process of Error Analysis. It also addresses the issue of explaining mistakes in order to correctly minimize them. In support of this, James (2013) presented that Error Analysis is a comparison of learners with English itself, evaluating how unenlightened individuals were. Further, Selinker & Gass (2008) considered Error Analysis as a "red flag" which means an alarm sign demonstrating the learners' comprehension of the second.

Error Analysis has two objectives. The first one is theoretical that deals with what and how learners learn a language. The other is more practical, and it involves how to assist learners in learning a language by utilizing prior information (Corder, 1974 cited in Mungungu, 2010). Also, Ellis (1994) suggested the process of Error Analysis provided by Corder (1974), including five stages such as (1) error gathering, (2) error classification, (3) error description, (4) error explanation, and (5) error evaluation. Vahdatinejad (2008) noticed that Error Analysis may be utilized to discover what a student still needs to be taught. Based on that statement, EA offers the benefit of identifying student weaknesses in writing and providing the necessary education to learners.

2.4 Error Classification

According to Hengwichitkul (2006), subject-verb agreement, tenses, parts of speech, participial phrases, relative clauses, passive voice, parallel structure, punctuation, run-ons, and fragments were all examined errors at the level of the sentence in another study recognized as errors. Similarly, Runkati (2013) grouped the errors discovered in her study into two groups. The first category is sentential errors such as fragments, run-ons, subject-verb agreement, word order, tenses, capital letters, and punctuation. The second

one involved lexical errors, such as articles, prepositions, word choices, nouns, and numbers. Specifically, this study is based on the theory of Ho (2005), there were 8 common types of errors in students' writings such as Dangling Modifier, Squinting Modifier, Illogical Sentence, Fragmented Sentence, Run-On Sentence, Inappropriate Coordinating Conjunction, Inappropriate Subordinating Conjunction and Inversion of Subject-Verb. These errors would be explained as follow:

- Dangling modifier: the modifier in a sentence (word or phrase) is not associated with the element that it modifies
- Squinting modifier: is often an adverb that can be misplaced. It makes the sentence ambiguous since the modifier can feasibly modify both the left and right sentence
- Illogical Sentence: a sentence that has a jumbled-up ordering of clauses and needs to be re-arranged.
- Fragmented Sentence: an incomplete sentence that does not fully express an idea, meaning or message like complete sentences. A fragmented sentence lacks a complete subject and verb and is not an independent clause
- Run-on Sentence: a multi-clause sentence that is not bridged by punctuation or word.
- Inappropriate Coordinating Conjunction: a sentence that has unsuitable coordinating conjunction to connect the co-ordinate clause with the main clause
- Inappropriate Subordinating Conjunction: a sentence that has unsuitable subordinating conjunction to connect the subordinate clause with the main clause
- Inversion of Subject-Verb: the sentences' placement of the subject and verb is problematic with inversion forms in English.

Since the current study focused on errors in English sentence structures, the error analysis identified in the preceding studies was utilized. Other types of analysis were also referred to as sub-categories of sentential

2.5 Source of Errors

Several studies discovered many different sources of errors. (1) Interlingual errors, (2) intralingual errors, (3) communication strategy-based errors, and (4) induced errors are the four causes of errors found by James (1998). Later, Hinnon (2014) classified causes into three categories: (1) negative transfer of the mother tongue, (2) lack of understanding in the target language, and (3) differences between the mother tongue's sentence structures and the target language's sentence structure. However, a variety of scholars proposed only two sources of errors, namely interlingual errors and intralingual errors (Richards, 1974; Penny, 2001; Heydari and Bagheri, 2012; Kaweera, 2013; Runkati; 2013; Rattanadilok and Othman, 2015). Specifically, Richard further explained that (1) interlingual errors refer to errors caused when learners wrongly use the rules of their first language when they produce sentences of the target language and (2) intralingual errors involves errors caused by learners' incomplete knowledge of the target language.

3. Methodology

Currently, the study adopted a qualitative design to delve into essay writing to uncover the common errors in English sentence structures committed by EFL sophomores, and also the factors that caused such errors. The data was gathered from 80 essays composed by 80 second-year students from the School of Foreign Language who had already taken the essay writing course.

The procedures for exploring the frequent errors applied in the study were in five steps (Ellis, 1994) such as (1) collecting the data, (2) identifying the data, (3) describing the errors, (4) explaining the errors and (5) evaluating errors. Those errors were determined and sorted out into 8 types based on document analysis anchored in the already made construct of sentence structure errors as proposed by Ho (2005). The researchers then counted the number of errors committed by each student and recorded them on the table of common errors (Table 1)

For the second question, to obtain sufficient information on the causes of students' English sentence structure errors in writing works, 80 students were required to participate in an interview form, including 13 questions that were administered by the researchers. To have scientific bases for the proposals, the researchers examined previous studies on sentence structure errors as grounds for more accurately checking students' sentence structure errors; discovering the sentence structure errors of EFL students, the causes of these errors for students, and the suggestions to increase the quality of using English sentence structure.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

a. English Sentence Structure Errors

According to the analysis of 80 pieces of writing on random topics, 7 out of 8 categories under the study of Ho (2005) were found. These were (1) Dangling Modifier, (2) Squinting Modifier, (3) Illogical Sentence, (4) Fragmented Sentence, (5) Run-on Sentence, (6) Inappropriate Coordinating Conjunction, and (7) Inversion of Subject-Verb. Although all the writing essays shared the same characteristics in terms of error categories, obviously, there was a difference in the frequency of errors made as claimed. The analyzed data of each writing genre are presented in Table 1 below.

As shown in Table 1, there found 71 fragment forms of 49 essay writings. This means that the majority of the essays written by the students are not syntactically completed. There were some discussions on this problem, when students attempt to generate lengthier, more complicated sentences by adding words and clauses, they will most likely produce fragments (Harris, 1981). Followed by Run-on with 38 sentences found in 25 writings. Otherwise, several errors under the study of Ho (2005) were not frequently made in the writing essays of second-year students e.g. Dangling Modifier (6), Illogical Sentence (5), Inappropriate Coordinating Conjunction (5), Squinting modifier (1)

and Inversion of Subject-Verb (1). There was no Inappropriate Subordinating Conjunction error found in essays.

Table 1: Sentence structure errors

Classification	No. of Frequency	Examples
Dangling Modifier	6	<i>Surfing the web, Facebook, or Youtube, etc, ads can be seen a lot on it</i>
Squinting Modifier	1	Consumers want to find out the products they need <i>when they come to the store they will have a lot of time</i>
Illogical Sentence	5	<i>The benefits to bring for the company, enterprise and consumer that advertising is more beneficial than harmful.</i>
Fragment	71	For instance, <i>more strong computers, cell phones with a good camera and player software.</i>
Run-on	38	In short, advertising is still very vague <i>it can trick you or annoy you all the time</i>
Inappropriate Coordinating Conjunction	5	We are attracted by a big round hamburger with lots of cheese and meat, <i>but</i> we buy it
Inappropriate Subordinating Conjunction	0	
Inversion of Subject-Verb	1	But does it benefit or the other way around for university students is <i>what will we</i> break down in this essay
Others	39	

There were some types of errors that were not included in the study of Ho (2005) and were mentioned in the others such as Non-parallel Sentences and Subject-Verb Agreement. Those types of errors appeared 39 times in 35 essays. In spite of that, those errors are neglected since the focus of this study is 8 sorts of errors (Ho, 2005). The findings reveal that students struggle with writing in English, even though they are majoring in English.

b. Sources of Errors

The elements that contribute to students' sentence structure errors were collected from interviews. The data relating to such aspects went to mother tongue interference, a lack of grammatical knowledge, and teaching materials or methods; the following details include the interview data with some correctly relevant explanations.

c. Mother Tongue Interference

One of the most prominent arguments presented by most second-year students when being interviewed was the effect of their mother tongue. It is clear that Vietnamese has a significant impact on students' writing.

In this respect, 56 students particularly mentioned that they first thought in Vietnamese and then transform their ideas into English. This is the response of Student 42 *"I frequently think the sentence in Vietnamese first and then translate it into English; even*

though I know it is indeed incorrect and harmful, I can not change it." Regarding this statement, the researchers discovered that the native language was one of the factors influencing students' inaccuracies in sentence structure when writing essays. Students typically used their native tongue, for example, composing and writing Vietnamese sentences first, then translating them into English. As a result, the translation would differentiate from ideal English.

Researchers can deduce from the above response that students regard Vietnamese and English structures to be the same, which can lead to structural errors. For instance, in Vietnamese, there is a sentence "cô ấy xinh đẹp". When students write such a Vietnamese structure and translate it into English "she beautiful," they would produce a fragmented sentence since there are no to be verbs "is/ am/ are" in the Vietnamese structure. As a result, the structure of the first language became a significant factor in determining sentence structure errors

d. Teaching Methods and Materials

The majority of the students noted the teaching approach was effective. However, there are a few inconsistencies relating to teaching approaches.

When it comes to teaching approaches, the primary cause was the teachers' unsatisfactory explanations. Students claimed that they made errors because their teachers did not provide them with in-depth explanations of sentence structure. Furthermore, they perceived that the teaching techniques used by writing teachers have not assisted them to develop their abilities to use English structure adequately. The researchers interviewed a student about the methods utilized by the writing lecturer.

The response was as follows: *"Teachers explore the concept and provide some sentence structure examples, but they do not go into detail regarding sentence structures. The approach has not aided in the development of the ability"*.

Considering the student's comment, the researchers assessed that the writing teacher's explanations were good but appeared to be improperly conveyed. Students' misunderstanding resulted in writing errors.

Moreover, teachers exclusively prioritize academic vocabulary in academic writing, with little regard for sentence structure. *"Teachers generally emphasize on expanding topics in writing and relevant academic terms, so students have not yet acquired the capacity to employ proper sentence structure,"* a student said. A consequence is that students' essays would be more academic in terms of technical terms, but those essays would be incomplete in terms of sentence structure. Thus, the essays would be incoherent and sometimes lead to misinterpretation by the reader.

Regarding teaching materials, participants stated that the structure of English is very rich, so the materials provided by the teacher only partially support this belief. When the researchers inquired about the source of materials in the writing subject, two students responded as follows: *"I think it only partially helps."*

“If I want to specialize, I need to read more books outside of the curriculum” and “the materials are relatively sufficient, but there are many rare structures that have not been mentioned, forcing me to conduct additional research on the internet”.

We noticed from the students' responses that they used external sources of learning such as the internet and other related materials because the provided materials are insufficient, particularly in terms of English structure diversity.

e. Lack of Grammatical Knowledge

When it comes to academic writing, one of the significant barriers for students is an inadequate understanding of English grammar. Because of their insufficient knowledge of grammar, 65 students stated that it was problematic for them to identify errors. Academic essays require students to produce and employ complicated sentences to indicate their academic level, and many students suffer from this due to a lack of grammatical comprehension as well as a limited understanding of English sentence structures. As mentioned earlier, the English sentence structures are extremely rich, which gives rise to the following difficulties faced by students.

In line with this, some students shared the same view *“I find it challenging to recognize a wide range of similar sentence structures”* and *“There are too many sentences and structures in the essays, and they are too long and complex to check and remember them all”*. In addition, because students are unable to comprehend and cannot apply English grammar, they choose to memorize structures.

As student 7 stated, *“I have a limitation of grammatical understanding and I frequently memorize, so I am psychologically affected and forget all the structure when I take tests. If there is a sentence structure error, I cannot recognize it”*. Memorizing and rigidly implementing the structures will decrease students' flexibility in the subsequent use of the structures and result in more sentence structure problems.

f. Others

A noteworthy cause that stems from student learning is that students are mainly concerned with the meaning of sentences in essays. Approximately 20 students stated that they are focused on both structure and meaning while writing, but they are more interested in how to make the essay more meaningful instead of how to apply English structures effectively. Another factor is that students have to struggle with the allotted time when producing essays.

A typical response from student 2 is that *“Because I didn't have enough time to write the essays, therefore after I completed writing, I didn't have time to re-read and verify it”*. Even if students had time, several of them did not recheck their writing.

Student 10 admitted that *“Sometimes I did not see my errors since I was too lazy to re-read or I only skim when checking”*. This admission proved that students are either careless with their essay writing or do not have the tendency of double-checking their work.

5. Solutions

The researchers made propositions based on the current background of English sentence structure errors among English majors at Can Tho University, as well as their desire to enhance the ability to use sentence structure through interviews. The following offers were made in order to assist students in avoiding English sentence structure errors while also cultivating the quality of teaching and learning English essay writing courses.

5.1 Solutions for Schools of Foreign Languages

According to Giang (2017), Schools of Foreign Languages should direct subject groups and all teachers to renew the assessment of subjects in the direction of enhancing the form of major works such as mini theses and theses. At the same time, the Schools of Foreign Language should pay more attention to evaluating and correcting sentence structure errors in students.

As being interviewed, student 8 offered that *“students need more opportunities to practice writing, so the Schools of Foreign Language should motivate students to write in many multiple types, not only writing essays from which students can acquire and utilize sentence structures in many various contexts”*.

Through this proposition, the Schools of Foreign Language should expand the organization of seminars on the topics of scientific research, school and employment, e.g, and encourage students to write reports or reflections after participating. The school should hold competitions for writing that stimulate students to enter. Quality compositions by students should be widely disseminated on School’s social network and be rewarded significantly.

Further, student 63 recommended, *“I believe it is advisable to reallocate the program from the first year of EFL students to assess their competence. The Schools of Foreign Languages can then plan some extra courses to provide students more opportunity to evaluate their knowledge and acquire experience.”*

The School of Foreign Languages should engage with the university management to classify students based on their ability and distribute study programs from the beginning of the first year. For example, the school may provide tests for students in order to categorize their capacities based on their levels, thereby allocating classes and study programs. Improving students' writing abilities and sentence structures from the initial stage would prevent students from being incompetent in sentence structure application even though they have studied through several writing and grammar courses.

5.2 Solutions for Teachers

Tennant (2001:27) provided two methods of correcting students' sentence structure in writing: (1) correcting on paper, using a red pen to underline the errors so that students can easily recognize them (this method was mentioned by the majority of participants in the interview) and (2) writing lengthy comments in which teachers explain grammar, ask questions regarding the development of meaning and logic, suggest alternative

structures, and restructure the sentences. In support of this, teachers should regularly correct and give feedback on students' essays. The purpose of the academic essay writing module is to improve students' ability to write accurately on a variety of issues. Hence, this requires teachers to give clear instructions on sentence structures.

In addition, teachers should clarify the differentiation between English structural features and Vietnamese structural features for their students. Simultaneously, teachers should let students translate sentences and notice the distinction in sentence structure between Vietnamese and English on their own. Besides, teachers should encourage the self-correction of their students. Teachers can have students read their sentences again and correct themselves. Then teachers re-read to find mistakes that the students cannot correct. Most importantly, teachers should give students extra time to check their essays. For example, outside of the allotted time for a piece of writing, teachers should give students another five minutes to check the structures they have constructed.

Furthermore, teachers can compose or utilize previous courses' essays that contain several sentence structure errors for students to discuss and identify structural errors in the writings. At the same time, teachers explain the errors and how to address them so that students can take notes, memorize, and avoid repetition. Besides learning Writing in the essay writing module, teachers need to provide extra exercises to supplement their knowledge of sentence structure. These suggestions of second-year students from the interview will assist the teacher in not only correcting the error but also providing explanations for the correction.

5.3 Solutions for Students

Regular practice and perseverance will bring the highest efficiency for students in constructing sentence structures. The more students practice writing, the faster they will improve. Students can write not only essays but also many different genres. Rewriting is also an effective way to reduce sentence structure errors. In fact, most students do not rewrite their writing after being corrected and commented on by their teacher. They only skim through those mistakes that lead them to be difficult to avoid making mistakes later. Moreover, students will find it easier because the errors have been underlined by the teacher so they can correct them.

As aforesaid, students claimed that the lack of grammar knowledge is one of the main sources triggering sentence structure errors, therefore, consolidating structure and grammar understanding is essential. Students should concern with the basic knowledge in the textbook from which they can overcome errors in the use of sentence structures. Further, some materials such as articles, books, and newspapers also assist students in enhancing their ability to employ sentence structure since those materials contain a wide range of sentence structure types.

6. Discussion

The current study found that students made 7 errors in English sentence structure when writing English essays, including (1) Dangling Modifier, (2) Squinting Modifier, (3) Illogical Sentence, (4) Fragmented Sentence, (5) Run-on Sentence, (6) Inappropriate Coordinating Conjunction, and (7) Inversion of Subject-Verb. Those errors were also associated with four categories of sentences as shown in their writings. These sorts of sentences are simple sentences, compound sentences, complex sentences, and compound-complex sentences. This study's findings matched the study on Common Errors Found in the Use of Sentence Structure conducted by Chandra, D., & Wijaya, H. P. (2016). Obviously, it indicates that second-year EFL students at Can Tho University in general are still having trouble with errors in English sentence structure. This research concluded that English teaching at Can Tho University should be modified in order to assist students to enhance their knowledge of English Sentence Structure.

The investigation also discovered elements that lead to students' English sentence structure errors in their writing essays. This research reveals three major datasets and one subcategory about the factors. Three main factors of sentence structure errors are mother tongue influence, teaching methods and materials, and the lack of grammatical knowledge. In addition, other factors regarding students' ignorance of the sentence structures in their writing essays and the allotted time for writing essays.

In reference to the first cause which is mother tongue influence, Kramersch (2013) pointed out that it is the effect of a profound culture that is already ingrained in oneself. Formerly, Krashen (1981) and Nation (2001) proposed solutions to help students reduce first language interference so that their spoken and written English improves. The next factor is teaching methods and materials. Several students in the interview agreed that the teacher conveyed the lessons during English writing class in a way that was not in-depth, making it difficult for them to absorb. Moreover, teachers primarily place emphasis on academic vocabulary in writing essays and ignore sentence structures, as a consequence, their lack of comprehension leads to unexpected writings with erroneous English sentence structure. Additionally, the resources offered by teachers do not fully assist their English sentence structure comprehension and application. As a result, students referred to certain external sources such as the internet and other relevant books. The researchers hypothesize that the online resources were invalid and might have contributed to inaccuracies in their sentence structures. The third element relates to a lack of grammatical competence. Despite having taken grammar and writing courses, students are still confused when it comes to applying English sentence structures to their writing essays due to the variety of structures in English as well as the shortage of basic grammar understanding.

7. Conclusion

There were seven (7) types of errors revealed in the findings, such as (1) Dangling Modifier, (2) Squinting Modifier, (3) Illogical Sentence, (4) Fragmented Sentence, (5) Run-on Sentence, (6) Inappropriate Coordinating Conjunction, and (7) Inversion of Subject-Verb. Among them, Fragmented is the most prevalent error, accounting for 71 errors out of 49 essays. Following that, 31 run-on errors were also detected in 25 essays. These two errors are frequently discovered by both domestic and international scholars in students' academic writings of various genres. Inappropriate Subordinating Conjunction could be considered the least frequently committed error by students. In addition to the aforementioned errors, students' essays contained Non-parallel Sentences and Subject-Verb Agreement.

A large number of errors was due to the usage of sentence structures, since the frequency of errors demonstrates this problem clearly. And the components involved in students' English sentence structures were mother tongue involvement, teaching methods and materials, a lack of grammar, and other factors such as the allotted time and the undivided attention on academic vocabulary.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

Both authors strongly agreed on the publication of this paper and there was no contention or rivalry during finishing the work. In other words, the authors declare no conflicts of interests in this article. Both authors are fully and equally responsible for the benefits and harms after this article is published. The authors, moreover, declare that the material presented by us in this paper is our original work, and does not contain any materials taken from other copyrighted sources. Wherever such materials have been included, they have been clearly indented or/and identified by quotation marks and due and proper acknowledgements given by citing the source at appropriate places.

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